



RELATIONSHIPS

All talk, no fiction

Libraries are collecting "living books" as readers hear stories from unlikely authors.

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WE ALL HAVE them, lurking in the back of our minds. Prejudices ready to jump out when our comfort zone is threatened. We like to kid ourselves that we are inclusive. Or perhaps we don't. We might accept that there are certain people whom we might never talk to, or will even avoid. Think of Tamworth. In December, the council refused to allow 25 Sudanese refugees to settle in the area. After widespread outrage the decision was reversed, but the damage had been done.

About the same time, 450 kilometres north-east by road, a quiet revolution was taking place in Lismore, with the launch of a daring scheme at the city library – hardly a hotbed of radical change – to overcome stereotypes and prevent racism. Instead of paperbacks, read people. A gay man, a Sudanese refugee, a Muslim and a woman in a wheelchair were among the 30 volunteers who could be "borrowed" by library users. Taking inspiration from a successful European model, which began in Denmark in 2000, it is an example of how one woman's vision influenced an entire community.

In August 2005, Sabrina Baltruweit, a 59-year-old yoga teacher, spotted a newspaper item about a Dutch library lending out people. "Reading it brought tears to my eyes," she says. As a child who grew up in Germany after World War II, Baltruweit had witnessed the devastating consequence when intolerance and discrimination are left unchecked: xenophobia, nationalism and war.

"As human beings we have a responsibility to prevent these things," she says. Baltruweit says she is distressed by how, in our society, because of the political climate we fear outsiders and asylum seekers. Impassioned, she made an appointment to see Lismore's head librarian. "She said, 'you go and do it and we'll support you', which is not what I wanted to hear." Countless hours on the telephone and umpteen meetings followed as a team of volunteers, lead by Baltruweit and Shauna McIntyre, 44, the council's community development officer, went to work.

Just over a year later, Australia's first "Living Library" was launched. "The buzz in the room was incredible," says Jenny Dowell, a councillor and "reader". "I've seen nothing like it in 16 years."

Within an hour of opening, the foyer was overflowing with people of all ages, primary school upwards. "All I could hear was this babble of conversation," says McIntyre. "It was very emotional."

A wall catalogue listed each of the 30 "living books" from disadvantaged or marginalised groups who could be "borrowed" for 30 minutes on site. The librarians laid down safeguards to ensure no racist or strong language was used (it wasn't). "We stressed to all the 'books' that they are in charge," Baltruweit says. "If they don't want to answer a question, they don't have to."

The Buddhist, the Muslim, the man with HIV and the young person with an intellectual disability were the most popular. Dowell read three "books" and found the first, Hadia Goldhawk, a local Muslim woman, the most touching. "I was particularly interested in finding out how she practised her religion and how her children managed at school," she says. "I've read a lot about Muslims but it was different when actually talking to someone face to face."

At the beginning, Goldhawk, wearing her hijab and a pinafore marked "book", admits she was "terribly nervous. But people were genuinely interested in finding out. They particularly asked about the way Muslim women dress. They didn't bring negative ideas. They listened."

Having experienced incidents of verbal abuse since September 11, Goldhawk volunteered in the hope of breaking down entrenched attitudes. Brought up a Catholic on Sydney's northern beaches, she converted to Islam with her husband Yusuf, after travelling through Europe and Morocco in the '70s. "I wanted to be like the Muslim women I met who were very strong with an incredible inner beauty," she says. And did she change attitudes? "Yes. Borrowers better understood that Muslims are just regular All talk, no fiction people, nothing strange," she says. "One Christian lady appreciated that we remember God a

lot. Christians don't understand that that is our main objective – all they hear about Muslims is this ridiculous terrorism stuff."

Books can't be taken home and, to date, there have been no interlibrary loans. Goldhawk says she has already gone on loan to a school. Another reader was threatened with a fine when she brought back her living book – Alex, a farmer – an hour late. "It was so fascinating, the time flew," says Vanessa Ekins, 40. "I stayed the whole day. I wanted the young female police officer but she was booked solid."

Because of the event's success, Baltruweit says, the head librarian is now taking it on board. It will run once a month in Lismore and McIntyre has been inundated with phone calls from libraries across Australia. "We [also] want to take it to schools, aged care facilities, smaller towns and events," Baltruweit says.

It appears this longing for a meaningful connection is more acute as our cyber world expands and the circles in which we mix invariably shrink. "It's a rare opportunity for physical and person-to-person contact – not with a computer screen, a magazine, TV or video," says Nick Roy, a 50-year-old "book" who has lived with HIV for 19 years and volunteers to raise awareness about AIDS.

Chris Robinson, 59, who works at a Lismore men's and family centre, wanted to pick books that diverged from his own experience. He first talked to Angela, a lesbian feminist, about why she first became gay and her sexuality. He was more tentative with his second "book", Crystal Walker, a 22-year-old Aborigine. "I'm an older man and she is a younger woman," he says. "I would never have an opportunity to talk with someone like this. I came away with a real sense of compassion of the struggles that other people experience in their lives."

"I was a bit scared at first," says Walker, a Bundjalung woman, who has just completed her youth worker traineeship at Lismore council. "Then I started talking to Chris who asked if I'd experienced racism. It wasn't difficult to talk about."

Walker explained that in the local shops the security guard or sales assistant will often follow her. "I feel angry because we should be treated equally. It's just skin colour, we've got money like everyone else."

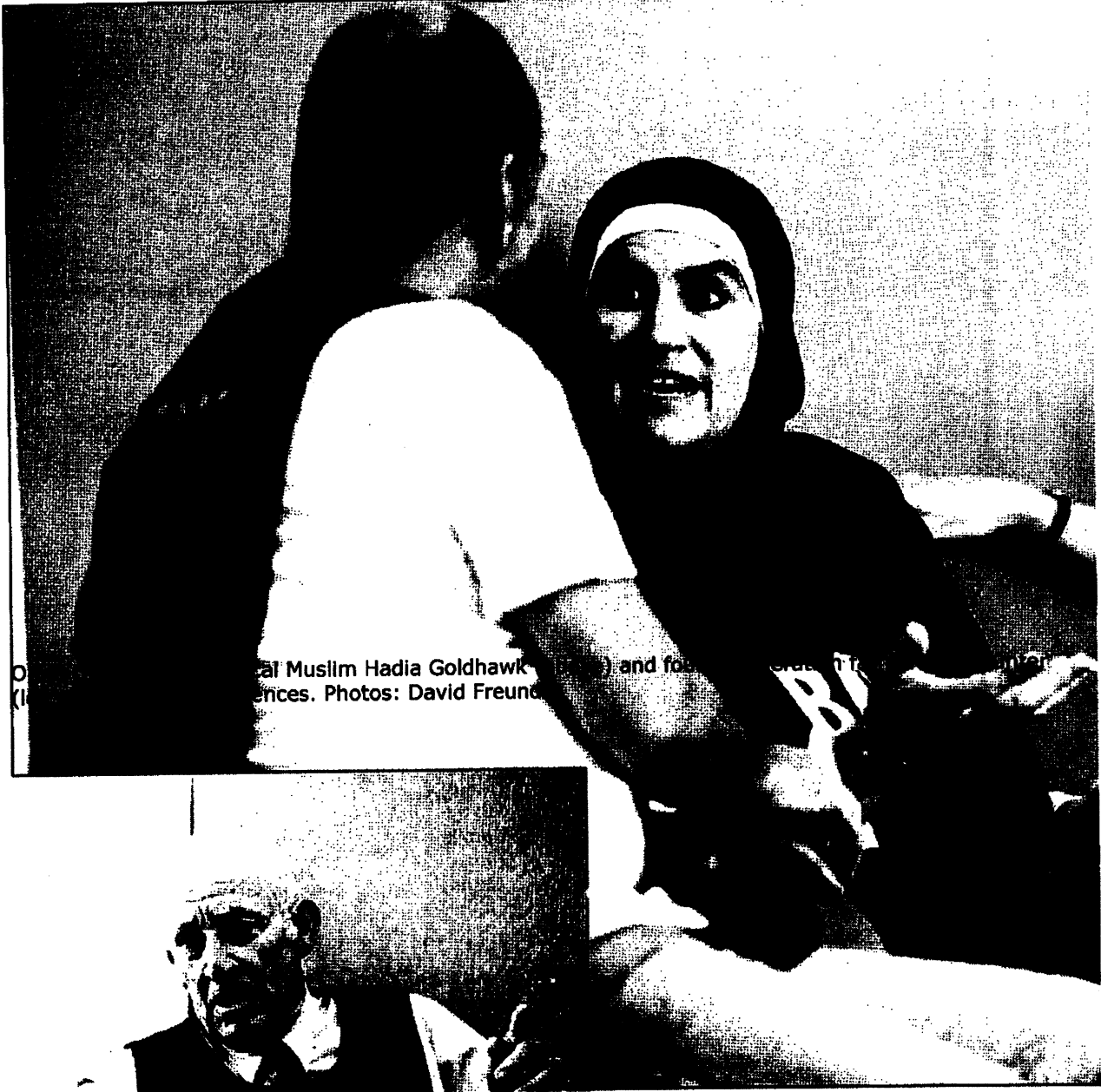
To gauge people's responses, questionnaires were handed out, completed by 25 living books and 48 "readers" out of 170 who attended. Ninety-eight per cent of readers said that they learnt something, one saying candidly: "[I] learned that not all Aboriginal people get drunk and violent". As McIntyre points out, "While it's a positive initiative, it's also sobering. We are reminded that due to ignorance, media and circumstances, some people in the community hold attitudes about others that are incorrect. It's a reminder of how precious and vulnerable these relationships are and how they are so easily undone and attacked."

On the other hand, the "books" showed how easily prejudices can dissolve, creating ripples of meaningful change. Dowell says she's ashamed to admit that before talking to Agnes, a middle-aged Filipino who married an older Australian man, she judged Filipino women. "Her husband wooed her and it was a great love match," Dowell says. "It forced me to look at Filipino brides differently."

Dorrie Garbutt, 86, a devout Christian who lives at a retirement village in Alstonville, spoke for the first time to a woman with a learning disability. "It was great to think that someone with a disability is not just pushed aside but is buying a house with her husband. I hope it makes people more able to understand that we are all a community and everyone has something to offer." She pauses to think about this. "Everybody's life is a book and probably our lives are much more interesting than fiction."

Reading sessions at Lismore Regional Library will be held on the first Friday of every month, 11am-2pm.





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...nces. Photos: David Freund